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Poortman, Anne-Rigt

*Published in:*  
European Sociological Review

*DOI:*  
[10.1093/esr/jcm024](https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcm024)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2007

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Poortman, A.-R. (2007). The First Cut is the Deepest? The Role of the Relationship Career for Union Formation. *European Sociological Review*, 23(5), 585. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcm024>

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# The First Cut is the Deepest? The Role of the Relationship Career for Union Formation

Anne-Rigt Poortman

Using retrospective data from the survey Divorce in the Netherlands 1998, I examine the influence of the relationship career on chances of union formation. Frailty models accounting for unobserved heterogeneity show that previous union experiences reduce chances of union formation. Furthermore, formerly married persons are less likely to enter a new union than former cohabiters, and so are people who had short-lived prior unions or had children. Findings also indicate that the first cut is the deepest. Union formation probabilities drop substantially after the first union dissolves but remain constant after subsequent break-ups. Finally, the impact of prior union experiences on subsequent union formation is generally found to be stronger for women than men.

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## Introduction

Recent changes in family life, such as the rise in cohabitation, delayed marriage, and divorce, have led to an increased diversity on the marriage market; whereas people used to search for a partner in their early twenties without any prior union experiences, they now (re-)enter the marriage market facing a pool of singles with diverse relationship histories. This study aims at insight into the individual-level implications of this increased diversity by highlighting the role of past union experiences for chances of union formation. Because rising divorce and separation rates are the driving force behind the increased diversity on the marriage market, the focus is on the role of past unions ended by divorce or separation, not death.

The increased diversity in singles' relationship histories is likely to have led to a new determinant of union formation: the relationship career. Conform the notion of interdependent life-course experiences within the life-course perspective (Elder, 1994),

prior union experiences are likely to affect people's subsequent chances and choices on the marriage market; past union experiences may make people more cautious about new relationships (e.g. Frazier *et al.*, 1996) and one's chances of finding a new partner may have become more restricted the second time around (e.g. Jacobs and Furstenberg, 1986).

Interestingly, prior research has rarely addressed the role of the relationship career. Most research on union formation has focused on its social-demographic and even more so, socioeconomic determinants (e.g. Sweeney, 1997; Uunk, 1999; Ono, 2003). Moreover, studies usually focus on the formation of either first or second unions, not on their interrelationship, as the concept of a relationship career implies. In so far evidence exists, most attention has been paid to the role of having children from prior unions (e.g. Koo *et al.*, 1984; Stewart *et al.*, 2003). Evidence on other aspects of the relationship career is fragmentary and such aspects are often not of main interest but included as controls or one of the many correlates of repartnering. I know of only a handful of studies

that have explicitly focused on aspects of the relationship career other than childbearing history, all in the context of second union formation. These studies have looked at the type of prior union, i.e. marriage or cohabitation (Wu and Schimmele, 2005), its duration (Bumpass *et al.*, 1990; Wu and Balakrishnan, 1994) and whether the divorce was own initiative (Sweeney, 2002).

This study aims to fill this gap in our empirical knowledge and addresses the interrelationship between subsequent unions by looking at the formation of first, second, and higher order unions. First, I compare chances of forming first, second, and higher order unions. By looking at the role of the number of prior unions, this study introduces a new aspect of the relationship career as a determinant of union formation. Furthermore, knowledge is gained about whether the impact of prior unions diminishes when people go on to have more unions. It seems likely that 'the first cut is the deepest' and that people learn to deal with later break-ups. Given that union dissolution has many adverse consequences and repartnering is a way to overcome these consequences (e.g. Kitson and Morgan, 1990; Holden and Smock, 1991), knowledge on whether the first cut is indeed the deepest shows whether disadvantages associated with past unions cumulate over the life course.

Second, I examine the role of prior children, the type, and duration of prior unions. Particularly, evidence on differences in union formation after dissolution of a cohabiting union vis-à-vis divorce is scarce. The inclusion of higher order unions allows for examining whether earlier findings in the context of second union formation also hold when higher order unions are taken into account. As such, more knowledge is gained about whether chances of repartnering depend upon people's experiences during their prior unions. As marriage, having children and longer durations imply greater investments, this study in particular shows how union formation depends upon how much people invested in previous unions.

A final contribution of this study is the applied method. I use survey data from the Netherlands containing retrospective information on all past unions. This implies that there is information about subsequent periods of being single for every person. Standard discrete-time event-history models can thus be combined with a multilevel approach. The use of such frailty models improves upon previous studies as possible self-selection on unmeasured characteristics associated with union entry and exit can be controlled for (Allison, 1995).

## Theoretical Background

Just as in other research on union formation, a stronger desire for a relationship is assumed to lead to higher chances of union entry, just as ample possibilities to meet potential partners or possessing desirable characteristics that attract others. I will argue that past unions may be associated with both such preferences and opportunities. The arguments are cast in terms of *changes* in preferences and opportunities due to prior union experiences, not in terms of stable traits associated with selection into and out of unions. Self-selection suggests that the number of prior unions increases chances of union formation as people with more past unions may be more inclined to move from one relationship to another (Halliday, 1980). Selection into marriage either suggests that the formerly married are more prone to enter a new union because of a stronger family orientation, or less prone as they may be less inclined to relationship hopping than those who opted for cohabitation, which implies less commitment than marriage. As to prior children, parents may attach greater weight to family life implying a high risk to form unions (Stewart *et al.*, 2003). For duration, selection either implies that longer durations increase chances of union formation as it indicates a stronger family orientation (Bumpass *et al.*, 1990), or decrease them, as short durations imply a tendency to relationship hopping. Although selection plays a role, the models used in this study largely overcome problems of self-selection. As past union experiences may affect men and women differently, gender differences in the impact of the relationship career are also discussed.

### Number of Previous Unions

People may have had high hopes when entering the first union. After a break-up, however, people may realize that relationships can go wrong, resulting in less desire for a new relationship. Alternatively, divorced or separated people may have more difficulties living alone and may miss having a partner more than people without union experiences (i.e. it is hard to miss something you never had), leading to stronger relational preferences. More support is found for the idea that people want to avoid getting hurt again: singles who were ever in a union more often prefer to live alone than those never in a union (Van Hoorn, 2000) and the divorced have less desire for marriage than the never married (Frazier *et al.*, 1996). After a break-up, people may also have greater difficulties meeting others. Couples invest by doing things

together and going out less. Partners also create a smaller network of common and alike friends (i.e. couples as well) and this network contains relatively more kin than friends (Johnson and Leslie, 1982; Cargan, 1986; Fischer *et al.*, 1989; Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001). After a break-up, these investments are (partly) lost and people have to rebuild their networks and develop a more outgoing lifestyle. Finally, past unions may be used by others as a selection criteria (Kalmijn, 1991): it may be a positive (e.g. ability to commit) or negative 'badge' (e.g. inability to solve relational problems, stigma of divorce). Studies support the latter idea; people are not that willing to marry a divorced person (South, 1991).

Their weaker preferences, fewer meeting chances and reduced attractiveness, suggest that people who have been married or cohabiting in the past have smaller chances of entering a union than people without prior unions. It is however likely that the impact of past unions weakens as people go on to have more union experiences. Whereas the first failed union hits hard, the next ones will probably have less impact because people dealt with it before. Compared to after the first break-up, entering the market after having had a second (or more) union also means that people know that there may be new chances after all, thereby mitigating the emotional distress of a break-up. In addition, people may learn from the past by investing less in subsequent relationships. For example, people may decide to be less emotionally involved or retain more separate and out-going activities when they repartner. The above implies that chances of union formation do not linearly decrease as the number of prior unions increases. Instead, I expect to find the largest drop in chances of union formation after the first break-up and after that, when people have had more than one union, chances will decrease to a lesser extent. Although no studies compared chances of first, second, and higher order unions, descriptive figures show lower second union than first union rates (Prins and Levering, 1992). A study among widowed and divorced older adults shows that people with two or more unions are slightly, but not significantly, less likely to repartner than those with one prior union (De Jong Gierveld, 2004)—but most unions ended by death here. One study, however, finds that men with prior unions are more likely to enter a union than men with no prior unions (Stewart *et al.*, 2003). Estimates may be biased, however, because the sample of single men who were followed from the first to the second point of measurement in this study might be selective; men who already entered a union before

the first point of measurement are not in the sample (Stewart *et al.*, 2003: 96), and given that the average age at first measurement was little over 30 years old, the group of men who never had a union might be particularly selective in that these men are not that likely to form a union anyway.

## Type of Previous Unions

Marriage signifies strong commitment and an intention to make things work, as suggested by prior findings showing that married couples are more committed than cohabitants (Nock, 1995; Stanley *et al.*, 2004). The emotional impact of a divorce is therefore expected to be greater than that of a separation, leading to more cautious attitudes towards new relationships among the formerly married—although a counteracting mechanism may be that they have more difficulties to live without a partner. Other investments are also greater in marriage, leading to fewer meeting chances following divorce. For example, married couples engage more often in shared activities and have smaller networks than cohabitants (Johnson and Leslie, 1982; Kalmijn, 2001; Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001). The stigma of divorce may be greater than for separation from a cohabiting union given the institutionalized nature of marriage. The formerly married are thus less attractive, meet fewer partners and may be more cautious than former cohabitants, leading to smaller chances of repartnering. Studies show that former cohabitants repartner faster than the formerly married (without cohabitation), but those whose cohabitation was followed by marriage have higher repartnering rates than people who only cohabited (Stewart *et al.*, 2003; Wu and Schimmele, 2005).

## Duration of Previous Unions

Emotional investments are likely to increase at longer union durations. A break-up may thus be more devastating when people had longer unions, leading to weaker relational preferences. Alternatively, longer durations may lead to stronger preferences, because people have difficulties living alone (Bumpass *et al.*, 1990) or because longer unions imply great relational benefits, which might be expected again (Wu and Balakrishnan, 1994). Meeting chances are likely to decrease with longer durations, because people's social contacts become increasingly shared and, although they may start to do leisure activities more separately at longer durations (Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001), the frequency of activities may decrease or the type of

activities may change towards less outgoing activities. As to being a positive or negative badge, it is likely that longer durations are more positively evaluated than shorter ones as it indicates ability for long-term commitment. Given the implied opposing predictions, I refrain from a hypothesis about the effect of the duration of prior unions. Prior evidence is inconsistent; some studies find no effect (Mott and Moore, 1983; Koo *et al.*, 1984) and others a positive effect (De Graaf and Kalmijn, 2003; Wu and Schimmele, 2005).

### Children from Previous Unions

Having children signifies a strong and long-term commitment to the relationship. Hence, a break-up is particularly hurtful when children are involved, leading to more cautious attitudes towards new relationships (Lampard and Peggs, 1999). In addition, parents may for long not be open to a new relationship, as their lives still evolve around the children after the break-up, particularly for custodial parents (Stewart *et al.*, 2003). Parents' concerns about their children's well-being may also lead to greater cautiousness in selecting a partner; parents prefer to repartner only if accepted by the children or otherwise not (Lampard and Peggs, 1999). It could be argued that particularly single mothers would have a strong desire to repartner as a way to improve their economic situation. However, parenting concerns override economic concerns in mothers' divorce and custody decisions (Arendell, 1986; Brinig and Allen, 2000; Poortman and Seltzer, 2007) and this may hold for repartnering as well. Meeting chances may be particularly reduced in case of children; parents are likely to go out less, change their activities towards more family-oriented ones and develop a smaller and overlapping network (e.g. Kalmijn, 2001; Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001) due to their caring responsibilities. More importantly, the ongoing care and obligations to, particularly young, children after the break-up restrict people's opportunities to meet others, especially for custodial parents (Koo *et al.*, 1984; Teachman and Heckert, 1985). Prior children may also be a negative badge, because potential partners do not want to invest in non-biological children or fear being a stepparent (Koo *et al.*, 1984; Teachman and Heckert, 1985; Stewart *et al.*, 2003). Prior children are thus expected to lower chances of repartnering. Most studies indeed show so (e.g. Koo *et al.*, 1984; Smock, 1990; Sweeney, 1997; De Graaf and Kalmijn, 2003), although findings are less consistent for men (Stewart *et al.*, 2003).

### Gender Differences

Prior union experiences may have a stronger impact on women's than men's chances of union formation. It is often argued that marriage, and perhaps also cohabitation, is more beneficial to men than women (e.g. Bernard, 1982 [1972]; Waite and Gallagher, 2000). Despite the supposedly low benefits for women, they also do most of the emotional work in relationships (Thompson and Walker, 1989). A failed union may therefore hit harder on women than men (e.g. Willitts *et al.*, 2004) and the experience of relatively high costs and low benefits of a partnership may lead to less desire for a new union among women as well. Not only preferences may differ by gender, but studies also show that men have more objections to marrying a woman who has been married or has children than vice versa (South, 1991). It is unclear whether the decline in meeting chances is stronger for women, except when it comes to having prior children as women more often get custody. For example, the decrease in contact with friends, especially non-shared friends, is stronger among men (Fischer *et al.*, 1989; Kalmijn, 2001), but men continue to work more often than women after cohabitation, marriage and having children (Cuijpers *et al.*, 2004) and the workplace is the most important meeting place for remarried persons (De Graaf and Kalmijn, 2003). It is beyond the scope of this study to explicate mechanisms and hypotheses about gender differences for each aspect of the relationship career, but generally I expect to find a stronger impact of prior union experiences for women than men.

## Method

### Data

Data come from the survey 'Divorce in the Netherlands 1998' (Kalmijn *et al.*, 2000). The sample was based on a selection of 19 municipalities that were representative as to region and urbanization. From the population registers, three random samples, aged 30 to 75, were drawn: (i) persons in their first marriage, (ii) divorced persons who were not living with a new partner, and (iii) divorced persons living with a new partner. Hence, divorced persons are over sampled, which has the advantage that there are relatively many persons who had been single more than once. Furthermore, the sample refers to ever married persons, and does not include persons who were never in a union or only had been in cohabiting unions. Selectivity problems are expected to be minor,

however, because figures show that the majority (about 90–95 per cent) of Dutch persons enters a union before the age of 35 and that cohabitation as a substitute for marriage is rare in the Netherlands; cohabitations are either short-lived or end in marriage (Liefbroer and Dykstra, 2000).<sup>1</sup> If anything, the consequence of including only ever married persons is that effects of the relationship career are overestimated. As information about all unions is available, the unions studied here do not only pertain to (prior) marriages but also to (prior) cohabitations, be it followed by marriage or not.

The data contain retrospective information about the occurrence and timing of all past unions and births. Information about premarital cohabitation is incomplete: for prior unions it is only known whether respondents never married or ever married. I can therefore only make a distinction between cohabitation without marriage and the ever married (be it with or without premarital cohabitation) as to the type of prior union. Similarly, I can only look at chances of (re)partnering as the dependent variable, without making a distinction between cohabitation and marriage. However, the theoretical arguments about the effects of the relationship career refer to whether people still want to live with a partner or are able to find one, regardless of whether it is for cohabitation or marriage. Theoretically, a next step is to examine whether people opt for cohabitation or marriage as the arguments may more strongly apply to subsequent marriage than cohabitation: after a break-up, people may be less willing to commit and will thus prefer cohabitation over marriage.

I excluded cases with missing values on union timing, unions ended by death and unions occurring before the age of 18, people who repartnered the same partner, and people who had children before entering the first union—such pregnancies are few ( $n=26$ ) and constitute a different category of prior children than children from a serious relationship. Eventually, the sample consists of 1,243 women and 959 men. The first rows of Table 1 (for women) and Table 2 (for men) display how many persons dissolved a first, second, or higher order union and entered a union afterwards by showing how many persons were single for a second (i.e. one prior dissolved union), third (i.e. two prior unions), fourth, fifth, or even sixth time. As shown, 79 per cent of the women ( $n=979$ ) and 73 per cent of the men ( $n=704$ ) enters a second episode of singlehood after their first union ended. About 55 per cent ( $n=557$ ) of these women and 70 per cent ( $n=493$ ) of men enters a second union. Numbers are considerably lower for those in a third

or higher order episode of being single: 163 women and 127 men are single for a third time and for higher order episodes numbers drop below 30.

For each episode of being single a person-period file was constructed, containing a record for each year in which a person is at risk of union entry. For the first episode (entering a first union), the risk period starts at the age of 18 and ends with the year in which the first union was formed. For higher order episodes, the starting year is the year of the last union dissolution and ends with the year in which a new union was formed or the survey year (in case of no new union). The episodes were pooled into one dataset, so that subsequent episodes of being single are nested within individuals. Discrete-time event-history models that take into account the multi-level structure of the data are used: random-effects logit models or, in short, frailty models. These models do not only correct for dependency among subsequent episodes of singlehood due to observing the same person several times, but also for problems of unobserved heterogeneity (Allison, 1995: 243). Correcting for unobserved heterogeneity overcomes the discussed problem of self-selection to some extent and yields unbiased estimates for the relationship career. Frailty models expand upon event-history models for union formation by also including an individual-specific random variable, which represents unobserved heterogeneity at the individual level.<sup>2</sup>

## Analytical Strategy

The dependent variable is the probability that a person enters a union (either marriage or cohabitation) in a given year, provided that this person is still at risk. The central independent variables refer to: the number of prior unions, the type, and duration of previous unions and prior children. The analyses control for some well-known determinants of first and second union formation (e.g. Blossfeld, 1995; Sweeney, 1997). First, the effect of the number of unions will be assessed. These analyses include all episodes of being single and show differences in chances of entering a first, second, and higher order union. Second, the effects of characteristics of prior unions (i.e. type, duration, and children) will be estimated. Now, only second and higher order episodes of being single are included in the analyses, because characteristics of prior unions are per definition not defined for first union formation. The effects of the independent variables are estimated for men and women separately to examine gender differences and I test whether effects differ significantly.<sup>3</sup> Measures of the central



**Table 1** Numbers per episode and means of the independent variables for women

	First episode	Second episode	Third episode	Fourth episode	Fifth episode	Sixth episode	Total
Persons	1,243	979	163	21	3	0	
Ending in union	1,243	557	68	8	1	0	
Person-periods	6,715	7,868	1,035	112	9	0	15,739
<b>Characteristics prior unions</b>							
Married in most recent union <sup>a</sup>		0.938	0.393	0.286	0.333		
Duration most recent union <sup>a</sup>		12.461	5.975	3.619	7.000		
Age youngest child <sup>b</sup>							
0–6		0.309	0.184	0.048	0.000		
7–12		0.176	0.178	0.000	0.000		
13–18		0.137	0.178	0.190	0.000		
18+		0.071	0.129	0.286	0.667		
<b>Control variables</b>							
Age <sup>b</sup>	18.000	34.584	37.936	42.833	50.000		
School enrolment <sup>b</sup>	0.503	0.053	0.031	0.000	0.000		
Educational level <sup>b</sup>	11.037	11.676	12.248	12.548	10.833		
Working <sup>b</sup>	0.450	0.593	0.650	0.762	0.000		
Economic status occupation <sup>b</sup>	−0.775	−0.453	−0.313	−0.476	−0.430		
Parental divorce							0.073
Church member							0.698
Educational level mother							8.411
Economic status father's occupation							0.060
Missing father's occupation							0.050
Time since union dissolution		7.106	5.429	4.381	2.000		

Note: Means are calculated over persons, not person-periods, and per episode (except for time-constant variables).

<sup>a</sup>Means refer to the type and duration of the first union in case of the second episode of singlehood, to the second union in the third episode, and so on.

<sup>b</sup>Means for these time-varying variables refer to first year of episode.

independent and control variables are presented below. Descriptive statistics can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

## Measures

### Number of prior unions

Three dummy variables indicating whether someone has no prior unions (first episode), one prior union and two or more prior unions. The reference group differs between models to assess which contrasts differ significantly and hence, whether the impact of the first break-up is stronger than that of subsequent ones. Too few people are in their third and higher order episodes to make a distinction between 2, 3, 4, or 5 prior unions.

### Type of prior unions

A dummy indicating whether someone was ever married during any of his or her prior unions (be it

with or without premarital cohabitation) versus cohabitation (without subsequent marriage). In addition, a dummy was created indicating whether the respondent was married in the most recent union, because it is likely that the union preceding the current episode of singlehood is more important given that this union is least long ago.

### Duration of prior unions

A variable indicating the total number of years a respondent spent in prior unions (i.e. sum of durations). Also, a variable indicating the number of years spent in the most recent union was constructed. The effects of union duration are assessed by making use of spline functions (Pindyck and Rubinfeld, 1991) for the following durations: 0–3 years long, 4–10, and over 10 years. The effect of, for example, the spline for 0–3 years long represents the change in the (log) hazard if union duration increases from 0 to 3 years.

**Table 2** Numbers per episode and means of the independent variables for men

	First episode	Second episode	Third episode	Fourth episode	Fifth episode	Sixth episode	Total
Persons	959	704	127	25	5	1	
Ending in union	959	493	80	17	2	1	
Person-periods	7,331	4,382	600	123	37	4	12,477
<b>Characteristics prior unions</b>							
Married in most recent union <sup>a</sup>		0.935	0.310	0.250	0.400	0.000	
Duration most recent union <sup>a</sup>		11.862	4.627	2.583	5.200	2.000	
Age youngest child <sup>b</sup>							
0–6		0.278	0.175	0.250	0.200	0.000	
7–12		0.188	0.175	0.208	0.000	0.000	
13–18		0.097	0.127	0.042	0.600	0.000	
18+		0.070	0.127	0.125	0.000	0.000	
<b>Control variables</b>							
Age <sup>b</sup>	18.000	36.192	38.143	37.542	41.600	36.000	
School enrolment <sup>b</sup>	0.589	0.058	0.032	0.000	0.000	0.000	
Educational level <sup>b</sup>	11.519	12.401	13.052	13.583	13.400	15.000	
Working <sup>b</sup>	0.396	0.891	0.865	0.875	0.800	1.000	
Economic status occupation <sup>b</sup>	–0.054	0.059	0.173	0.369	0.780	0.770	
Parental divorce							0.070
Church member							0.706
Educational level mother							8.159
Economic status father's occupation							0.002
Missing father's occupation							0.055
Time since union dissolution		5.255	3.843	4.200	7.200	3.000	

Note: Means are calculated over persons, not person-periods, and per episode (except for time-constant variables).

<sup>a</sup>Means refer to the type and duration of the first union in case of the second episode of singlehood, to the second union in the third episode, and so on.

<sup>b</sup>Means for these time-varying variables refer to first year of episode.

### Children from prior unions

Four time-varying dummy variables referring to the presence and age of children from prior unions: age of the youngest child 0–6, 7–12, 13–18, and over 18 years old (reference category is no prior children). It is not known whether children were living at the respondent's home or elsewhere, but it is likely that children under 18 are not living independently and live with the mother. For the majority of men (76 per cent) and women (70 per cent) prior children refer to children from their first union and only few have children from more than one union. Therefore, and because children represent a life-long commitment and will continue to play a role in someone's life, no separate variables were constructed to indicate whether someone has children from the most recent union.

### Age

Time-varying variable indicating respondent's age in years, and represented by splines for the following age groups: 18–22, 23–26, 27–30, 31–35, 36–40, 41–50,

and over 50 years old. In the analyses assessing the role of characteristics of prior unions, the first two age groups are combined because of too few cases to separate these groups.

### School enrolment

Time-varying variable indicating whether the respondent is enrolled in school, also referring to additional schooling after daily full-time education was completed (lagged by 1 year, because people may quit school in the year they enter a union).

### Educational level

Time-varying variable indicating the highest educational level in formally required years, ranging from 6 to 16.

### Employment status

Time-varying variable indicating whether the respondent is working (lagged by 1 year, because people,



especially women, may quit work when entering a union).

#### Economic status

For working respondents, a time-varying variable indicating the economic status of their occupation was constructed as an indirect indicator for income because retrospective income data are lacking. Economic status is measured by the scale of De Graaf and Kalmijn (1995), indicating the standardized average monthly net income in an occupation (from -1.81 to 2.43). Non-working respondents were assigned the episode-specific average.

#### Parental divorce

Whether parents were divorced when the respondent was 18 years old.

#### Church member at age of 14

Whether the respondent was a church member at age of 14.

#### Mother's education

The highest educational level of the respondent's mother, measured in formally required years, ranging from 6 to 16.

#### Father's economic status

The economic status of the father's occupation when the respondent was 14 years old, measured by the scale of De Graaf and Kalmijn (1995). Because missing values may indicate that the father was not working at that time, I include a dummy indicating whether father's economic status is missing or not.

#### Time since union dissolution

The analyses for the effects of characteristics of prior unions on repartnering also control for time since union dissolution to model duration dependency. This time-varying variable indicates the number of years since the last union dissolution until entry into the next union or the time of the survey if respondents do not repartner. Spline functions are used for 0–2 years after dissolution, 3–5, 6–9, and 10 years or more.

## Results

Table 3 shows the results of frailty models assessing the effect of the number of prior unions. Two models were estimated; the reference category is 'no prior unions' in

the first model and 'one prior union' in the second. The effects of the control variables show that chances of union formation first increase as men and women become older, but start to decline after the age of 30—although the rate of increase and decrease differs between men and women, as shown by significant gender differences in the effects of age. School enrolment decreases chances of union formation for women, as a possible role conflict would suggest, but not for men. Educational level does not affect women's union formation, but increases rates for men. As suggested by contemporary research on socio-economic prospects and first or second union formation (e.g. Sweeney, 1997; Bracher and Santow, 1998; Uunk, 1999), working men and women are more likely to enter a union than their non-working counterparts, but effects of job status are small. As to family background characteristics, parental divorce increases women's, but not men's, chances of union formation, whereas being a church member in youth and father's economic status lead to a decrease for both men and women.

When it comes to the variable of interest here, the results for Model 1 show that the likelihood of entering a union is significantly smaller when men and women had one prior union compared to having had no prior unions. For women, the odds are about 66 per cent ( $[1 - e^{-1.07}] * 100$ ) lower after the first union dissolved compared to having had no prior unions, and those for men are 53 per cent lower. The effects are more or less the same for having had two or more prior unions; compared to having had no prior unions at all, the odds are 68 per cent lower in case women had two or more prior unions and for men the odds are 55 per cent lower. The lower odds for higher order union formation reflect that many people do not repartner as the timing of union formation actually is faster for higher order than first union formation: the average duration until first union formation is 4.5 years for women and 6.5 for men, whereas for those who repartner the average duration until the second union is 4 (for women) and 3 (for men) years and 3 (men and women) years for higher order unions.

As the results for Model 2 show, there are no significant differences when comparing the odds of union formation after the first break-up with those after subsequent break-ups; after experiencing a union dissolution once, the likelihood of repartnering remains at the same level for both men and women. These results confirm the idea that the first cut is the deepest; the largest drop in chances of union formation is found after the first union dissolution, and after

**Table 3** Effect of number of prior unions on union formation: frailty models

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Age (splines)				
18–22	0.310**	0.486** <sup>a</sup>	0.310**	0.486** <sup>a</sup>
23–26	0.077*	0.206** <sup>a</sup>	0.077*	0.206** <sup>a</sup>
27–30	–0.015	0.060	–0.015	0.060
31–35	–0.092**	–0.089*	–0.092**	–0.089*
36–40	–0.102**	0.028 <sup>a</sup>	–0.102**	0.028 <sup>a</sup>
41–50	–0.062**	–0.116**	–0.062**	–0.116**
50+	–0.124**	–0.035 <sup>a</sup>	–0.124**	–0.035 <sup>a</sup>
School enrolment	–0.380**	–0.065 <sup>a</sup>	–0.380**	–0.065 <sup>a</sup>
Educational level	0.001	0.034*	0.001	0.034*
Working	0.396**	0.485**	0.396**	0.485**
Economic status occupation	0.087~	–0.024	0.087~	–0.024
Parental divorce	0.317**	0.057	0.317**	0.057
Church member	–0.241**	–0.325**	–0.241**	–0.325**
Educational level mother	0.012	0.018	0.012	0.018
Economic status father's occupation	–0.098**	–0.069~	–0.098**	–0.069~
Missing father's occupation	–0.043	–0.022	–0.043	–0.022
<b>Number of unions</b>				
No prior unions (Ref. cat. Model 1)	–	–	1.070**	0.755** <sup>a</sup>
One prior union (Ref. cat. Model 2)	–1.070**	–0.755** <sup>a</sup>	–	–
Two or more prior unions	–1.134**	–0.798**	–0.063	–0.044
Model X <sup>2</sup>	1286**		1286**	
Rho	0.052**		0.052**	

\*\*Significance < 0.01; \*significance < 0.05; ~significance < 0.10.

<sup>a</sup>Differences in effects between men and women are significant (< 0.05).

that, subsequent union dissolutions do not lead to a further decrease in chances of union formation. As expected, the results indicate that the first cut is deeper for women than men: the negative impact of having had a prior union (compared to no prior union) is significantly stronger for women than men. Finally, unobserved heterogeneity at the individual level does play a role. It can be seen that the proportion of the total variance explained by the individual-level component (rho) is about 5 per cent and significantly differs from zero. If unobserved heterogeneity is not controlled for, simple discrete event-history analyses show that the main conclusions about the effect of the number of prior unions still hold, but the negative effects are smaller (results not shown). Unobserved characteristics thus suppress the effect of prior unions, suggesting that people with prior unions have traits that increase their likelihood of union formation, such as an inclination to relationship hopping.

Table 4 shows the results of the frailty models to assess the influence of characteristics of prior unions. These analyses only include people in their second and higher order episodes of being single. I estimated two

models with different measures for duration and type of prior unions. Model 3 includes measures for whether people were ever married before and total time spent in previous unions. Model 4 includes the type and duration of the most recent union, because this union might be particularly important as it happened least long ago.

The control variables show that age has primarily a negative effect on chances of repartnering, more so for women. School enrolment has no effect, probably because only few people are enrolled, and higher education increases the odds of repartnering, but only for men. Employment increases chances of repartnering for men and women, and family background characteristics hardly have an effect. As to the time since union dissolution, it is found that men and women are particularly likely to enter a union in the first two years after divorce or separation. As in Table 3, there are no significant differences when comparing the odds of repartnering after the first break-up with those after later break-ups.

The results of Model 3 show that, as expected, men and women who were ever married have a significantly

**Table 4** Effects of characteristics of prior unions on union formation: frailty models

	Model 3		Model 4	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Age (splines)				
18–26	0.080	0.024	0.073	0.035
27–30	–0.090	–0.004	–0.094~	–0.003
31–35	–0.136**	–0.082~	–0.132**	–0.078~
36–40	–0.176**	–0.047 <sup>a</sup>	–0.165**	–0.043 <sup>b</sup>
41–50	–0.144**	–0.167**	–0.134**	–0.168**
50+	–0.184**	–0.106**	–0.174**	–0.116
School enrolment	0.043	0.114	0.041	0.125
Educational level	0.005	0.066** <sup>a</sup>	0.007	0.072** <sup>b</sup>
Working	0.305**	0.571**	0.302**	0.581**
Economic status	0.028	–0.054	0.042	–0.053
Parental divorce	0.152	–0.030	0.187	–0.042
Church member	–0.096	–0.140	–0.106	–0.143
Educational level mother	0.028	–0.031 <sup>a</sup>	0.031~	–0.030 <sup>b</sup>
Economic status father's occupation	–0.099~	–0.003	–0.105~	–0.009
Missing father's occupation	–0.127	–0.118	–0.090	–0.116
Time since dissolution (splines)				
0–2 years	0.580**	0.483**	0.589**	0.504**
3–5 years	–0.076	–0.104	–0.077	–0.098
6–9 years	0.050	0.006	0.042	0.008
10 or more	–0.020	0.076~	–0.029	0.079~
Two or more prior unions	0.151	0.135	0.145	0.099
<b>Characteristics of prior unions</b>				
Ever married (versus cohabitation)	–0.636**	–0.481*		
Married in most recent union (versus cohabitation)			–0.504**	–0.522**
Duration prior unions (splines)				
0–3	–0.133	0.122		
4–10	0.076*	–0.008		
10+	0.087**	0.101**		
Duration most recent union (splines)				
0–3			–0.116	0.065
4–10			0.071*	–0.016 <sup>b</sup>
10+			0.078**	0.111**
Age youngest child from prior unions (versus no prior children)				
0–6	–0.603**	–0.389*	–0.633**	–0.367*
7–12	–0.482**	–0.212	–0.499**	–0.207
13–18	–0.294	–0.419*	–0.312	–0.435*
18+	–0.091	–0.270	–0.096	–0.190
Model X <sup>2</sup>	637**		624**	
Rho	0.050		0.067~	

\*\*Significance < 0.01; \*significance < 0.05; ~significance < 0.10.

<sup>a</sup>Differences in effects between men and women are significant in Model 3 (< 0.05).

<sup>b</sup>Differences in effects between men and women are significant in Model 4 (< 0.05).

smaller chance of entering a new union than those who have only cohabited; the odds are 47 per cent lower for women who were once married and 38 per cent for men. Although the impact of having been

married seems to have a stronger impact on women's than men's chances of repartnering, the difference is not significant. The duration of prior unions also significantly affects union formation. Although prior

research yielded inconsistent results, the findings here show that longer durations increase the likelihood of entering a union, particularly for women. After a union duration of 3 years, the chance of union formation increases the longer women have spent in prior unions. For men, repartnering rates increase with longer durations when they spent more than 10 years in prior unions. Apparently, the theoretical mechanisms implying a negative effect of union duration are out weighted by the mechanisms implying a positive effect. In line with expectations and as found in other Dutch studies (Uunk, 1999), having children from prior relationships decreases chances of repartnering. For women, particularly young children, between the ages of 0 and 12, reduce their chances of union formation. Interestingly, not only young children reduce men's chances of entering a new union—albeit to a lesser extent than for women, who are usually assigned physical custody—, but also older children, particularly between the ages of 13–18 years old (also see Sweeney, 1997). Although younger children seem to affect women's chances of repartnering more than men's and vice versa for older children, gender differences in the effects are not significant. Model 4 yields similar results as Model 3, also with respect to the effects of union duration and type of prior unions, which are measured differently in Model 4: the duration and type of prior union do not seem to have a larger impact when referring to the most recent instead of all prior unions. Noteworthy is that union duration now has a significantly stronger effect for women than men. Lastly, the proportion of explained variance by the individual-level frailty is about 5 (Model 3) to 7 per cent (Model 4). Simple event history models show that particularly the negative effects of having been married and having prior children are somewhat smaller when unobserved heterogeneity is not controlled for (results not shown); self-selection is such that the effects are suppressed, suggesting that the formerly married and parents are more inclined to form unions, perhaps because of a stronger family orientation.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In a time of increased diversity on the marriage market with respect to singles' relationship histories, the relationship career may have become an important determinant of union formation. The present study has shown that union formation behaviour is indeed different for the expanding groups of people who re-enter the marriage market after divorce or

separation; chances of repartnering are considerably smaller than chances of first union formation. This is in line with descriptive findings showing lower second than first union rates (Prins and Levering, 1992), but this study suggests that the impact of prior union experiences may be greater than previous figures suggest. Prior estimates did not control for self-selection on unmeasured characteristics, such as a tendency to move in and out of relationships, and this study shows that failure to control for self-selection leads to an underestimation of the effect of having had prior unions. Because self-selection is taken into account, the smaller probabilities of repartnering can theoretically be explained by a change towards weaker preferences for a relationship and fewer marriage market opportunities, such as fewer meeting chances and being less attractive candidates, due to people's past union experiences.

As this study was one of the first to track the fate of people beyond their first union dissolution, it was also shown that the well-known disadvantages associated with union dissolution do not cumulate when people experience more than one union dissolution. The impact of past unions weakens as people go on to have more union experiences; chances of union formation drop considerably after the first union dissolves but remain at more or less at the same level after subsequent union dissolutions. It seems that the 'first cut is the deepest' and that, after their first union has ended, people learn from this experience in that they may become less emotionally distressed the next time or that they invest less in subsequent unions.

Among those who re-enter the marriage market after divorce or separation, chances of repartnering were found to differ as well, depending upon the type of prior unions, whether people had children and the duration of prior unions. Findings are generally in line with those from other studies on second union formation (e.g. Bumpass *et al.*, 1990; Uunk, 1999; Wu and Schimmele, 2005), but effects are found to be stronger when self-selection is controlled for. Men and women who were previously married have smaller chances of repartnering than their cohabiting counterparts, suggesting that marriages differ from cohabiting unions in that emotional investments and interdependencies are greater in marriages than in the more individualized cohabiting unions (Nock, 1995; Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001). In addition, the divorced may be less desirable as potential partners, because of the stigma associated with divorce. Because children typically imply great investments in a relationship and represent ongoing obligations even after the union has

dissolved, it is no surprise that men and women who have children from previous unions were found to be less likely to repartner than childless persons. Contrary to the idea that longer durations imply greater investments and hence, reduce chances of repartnering, people who had spent a longer time in prior unions were more likely to repartner than people with short-lived prior unions. Perhaps, longer durations indicate not only greater investments, but also that these investments have yielded great relational benefits as these unions lasted for a long time. Such benefits may be missed or expected again, leading to a stronger rather than weaker preference for repartnering (Bumpass *et al.*, 1990; Wu and Balakrishnan, 1994). A longer union duration may also be a positive badge on the marriage market.

Gender differences were also apparent. Generally, the impact of prior union experiences on union formation was greater for women than men, particularly when looking at the impact of having had any prior unions and the duration of the union. These findings are in line with the literature on gender differences in the marriage experience (e.g. Bernard, 1982 [1972]; Thompson and Walker, 1989); as women may benefit less from partnerships but at the same time do most of the emotional labour, they may generally have less desire for a new relationship than men and may be more sensitive to the balance between costs and benefits of a partnership. If this balance turned out to be more positive, as a longer union duration may imply, women repartner at a faster rate than men.

As this study showed that the relationship career is an important determinant of union formation, it would be worthwhile to elaborate upon its role in future research. Because I was not able to make a distinction between people who married with and without premarital cohabitation, an unanswered question is whether there are differences between these two groups with respect to their chances of repartnering. Previous studies suggest these groups may differ, but evidence is scarce and these studies have only looked at second union formation (Wu and Schimmele, 2005) or may be severely hampered by problems of self-selection (Stewart *et al.*, 2003). Access to longitudinal data containing information about people's entire union history, including premarital cohabitation, would also allow for an examination of the impact of the relationship career on the type of union formed, that is, cohabitation or marriage. There are indications that the type of prior union and prior children affect the type of union formed (Stewart *et al.*, 2003; Wu and Schimmele, 2005),

but this evidence is limited, pertains to second union formation and does not take into account problems of possible unobserved heterogeneity. The role of other aspects of the relationship career, such as the number and duration of prior unions, for the type of union formed also need further investigation. Besides these unanswered questions due to data limitations, the findings of this study raise some other questions as well. Given the strong impact of the relationship career on union formation, the reasons for its impact become all the more interesting. Both changing preferences and opportunities may be responsible. Future research may assess whether the differential chances of union entry depending upon people's past experiences are a matter of choice or chance by directly measuring people's desire to enter a union or their marriage market opportunities, although these are difficult to measure in survey research. The lower rates of union formation among the expanding groups of divorced and separated persons suggest an increase in the number of singles in the future. As divorce and separation have become more common, however, a future question is whether the impact of past union experiences becomes weaker over time and multiple partnerships become more widespread in modern societies.

## Notes

1. Recent estimates (for 2004/5) show that cohabitation without marriage is rare as less than 5 percent of the Dutch has only cohabited at age 40, an age after which first union formation rarely occurs (Dykstra and Poortman, 2006). Although the sample also includes persons in their thirties for whom selectivity may be problematic because first union formation may still occur within this age range, few respondents are under 35 (5 per cent) or between 35 and 40 (8 per cent) and analyses including only respondents over 35 or 40 yield similar results.
2. Frailty models are most commonly used in case of repeated events per individual. An alternative is a fixed effect approach, but Allison (1995: 245) warns against such methods when the number of prior events (i.e. unions) is included as independent variable. Another method is to simultaneously model exit from and entry into unions with random-effect models (Steele *et al.*, 2004), but my interest is not in the role of the relationship career for exiting unions (which calls for different theoretical arguments), the method is highly data

extensive and such models still have to find their way to a less specialized public.

3. The effects for men and women are derived from interaction models including interaction terms between gender and the independent variables. The interaction terms show whether effects differ significantly.

## Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO, 451-03-064). I would like to thank Jeroen Weesie for his methodological advice and support.

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## Author's Address

Dr Anne-Rigt Poortman, Department of Sociology/ICS, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel: +31 30 2534306; Fax: +31 30 2534405; Email: A.Poortman@uu.nl

Manuscript received: May 2006